

EPA's Comparative Risk Projects

Planning for Sustainability



What is Planning for Sustainability?

In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development (Bruntland Commission) issued a report that defined sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The same definition was adopted by the President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD), a group of Federal agency heads, top industry executives, and environmental group leaders appointed by President Clinton in 1993 to advise him about "integrating the economy, equity, and environment into national policy."

First Steps in Sustainability Planning

The first task for planners who seek environmental sustainability is to ask what the community they work in wishes to sustain. The resulting spectrum of public values may range from wilderness area protection and biodiversity to job creation and the availability of mass transportation, to name a few. Once the question of what to sustain is resolved, planners will have to ask how the government, economy, and society must develop and change to support the quality of life and environment that is desired. Researching potential answers to this question will sometimes offer the planners and decisionmakers ideas for new synergistic relationships between short-term and long-term social, environmental, and economic elements. A first step in this research is to define barriers to sustainability. Comparative Risk offers a process for analyzing barriers to sustainability.

Comparative Risk and Sustainability

Comparative Risk is a tool that planners, policymakers, and representatives of diverse segments of the population of states and communities use to identify and analyze the causes, distribution, and extent of damage (i.e., risk) associated with the most serious environmental threats to human health, ecosystems, and quality of life. From an environmental sustainability planning perspective, these same threats may be regarded as barriers to a state/community's desired level of sustainability. Using a working definition of sustainability programs which defines them as those which "restructure human activities so that natural resources are not depleted and environmental quality remains unimpaired," Comparative Risk practitioners can integrate sustainability planning into Comparative Risk project activities.

Comparative Risk projects that want to plan for sustainability should consider the following steps :

- 1) Develop a community vision for a sustainable environment.
- 2) Develop goals for sustainability in economic, social, and environmental sectors and identify opportunities for and challenges to attaining those goals.
- 3) Use comparative risk analysis to help understand the impacts on health, ecology, and quality of life from environmental problems that have been identified as barriers to sustainability.



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4) Once problem areas have been analyzed and priorities have been set, risk reduction strategies may be identified that balance environmental/economic relationships and the distribution of costs and environmental benefits with the kind of future people want.

5) Futures research techniques, including analyses of trends in driving forces such as demographics and overall economic conditions, may offer a window on the long-term direction of environmental problems and the viability of risk reduction strategies.

6) Buy-in from every sector of the community is necessary throughout the project, from defining sustainability to making it a reality.

7) Careful monitoring of environmental and economic trends will ensure that strategies remain appropriate and continue to bring the community closer to sustainability.

Advantages of Public Involvement

Involving the public in sustainability planning will help to ensure broad support; for example,

- public understanding of environmental and economic processes can create grass-roots pressure for change and become the driving force that moves consumer and commercial activity closer to sustainability;

- public involvement helps dispel misconceptions about relationships between economic activities and environmental quality (good environmental quality doesn't call for drastic reductions in numbers of jobs or diminished lifestyles).

- in their roles as project participants and decision-makers, community members learning about sustainability as part of the Comparative Risk process are inclined to hold government, commercial, and other individuals accountable to the community's environmental vision and goals.

More on the PCSD

The President's Council on Sustainable Development recently completed a report detailing opportunities for the United States to move closer to sustainability. That report includes 10 goals for a sustainable future and makes 154 recommendations for specific actions to be taken that would improve economic and regulatory policy, natural resources management, education, and international policy.

The U.S. EPA has already instituted several successful programs in support of that report's recommendations. Recommended activities are planned or are already underway in several other Federal agencies as well. One common theme of many strategies intended to implement PCSD goals is a reliance on cooperation and mutually-beneficial relationships between government, the regulated community, and/or environmental groups. For more information on the PCSD, write to:

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